Birdwatching on Fair Isle.

Ultima Thule, and how it became an obsession.

‘I’m a birdwatcher and I’m not afraid to admit it’ titles an article by Matthew Stadlen in *The Daily Telegraph* that I was reading the other day on a flight to London.

Pair of Atlantic Puffins on North Gavel, Bu Ness, Fair Isle. Photo: Jan Jacops

Liked that one! And it goes on: ‘Some people don’t like birds. Something about their beaks perhaps. Or their feathers? Others are indifferent. Birds are merely the things that fly in the sky.’
Just like Matthew I love birds and I have done so since I was a small boy. Birds are part of my earliest memories of childhood, when I was growing up at the age of 3 or 4 at my grandfather’s place. He had a large aviary in his back garden full of Budgerigars. These were very tame; some of them were reared by hand. Some of them even stayed permanently flying in the living room, and pulling my hair to put in their nests…

Some memories are less pleasant, although at that time it seemed a normal thing to do. Walking in the forest with my grandfather, collecting eggs from blackbirds, taking them home and after puncturing them at both ends and sucking out the inside and swallowing the contents… bwakes…

Or the day that he taught me to shoot an air rifle for the first time. I ‘successfully’ shot a small bird (can’t remember the species now) and upon collecting my trophy I found it still alive, but unable to fly. So I put it in a box and watched for hours, only to see it dying in the end…. I remember it very well, crying for what I’d done. This was my first and last bird killing… at least on purpose.

So how did I end-up on Fair Isle, some tiny island halfway between Orkney and Shetland, in the middle of the Atlantic, where even during summer most of the time there are adverse weather conditions? Well for sure I’m not on a city trip. Not much city with 50 odd citizens anyway…

On Bu Ness with ‘Sheep rock’ in the background, Fair Isle.
My love for birds was forgotten for a long time, (work, marriage, children, building a house and so on) till about 8 years ago when we visited the Orkneys.

During our stay (in a superb B&B !) we met an older couple where the husband turned out to be a retired university professor, an ornithologist. He carried this very old book which he kept together by means of a rubber band and was very anxious to know whether or not we were birders, or at least he wanted to know what brought us to this very remote outpost of the UK?

He had come to see a very specific Owl, almost nowhere to be spotted any more in the UK except on the Orkneys. Believe it or not, the very same evening we managed to find ‘his’ Owl, and I was even able to take a picture of it. So the next morning at breakfast everybody at the table was very excited when I showed them the pictures I’d taken, although they were poor quality. (At that time I didn’t have a DSLR yet.)

It was the following day when we had our first encounter with a flock of Sanderlings. Little did I know of their existence, let alone their strange feeding behavior… they constantly follow the swell of the waves back and forth, collecting insects and the like from the ocean. In doing so, every now and then one of them delays retreating from the water and gets washed over, tumbling and turning and finds itself soaked, but nonetheless immediately continues his pursuit.
One word: beautiful! I’ve never witnessed this feeding pattern again, (at least not with a large flock of them) but have been looking for it ever since! It was the Professor teaching me all about Sanderlings, showing me them and their behavior in his little book.

Sanderling at Vatersay tombolo, Isle of Barra.  

This did not mean that I immediately became a twitcher and I don’t even consider myself one today, but since that day in July my ‘love for birds’ was definitively reignited. Strongly.

So Matthew continues: ‘Apparently it’s not ‘cool’ to be able to tell the difference between a blue tit and a great tit. But I can and I’ve always been happy that I can. My girlfriend still raises an eyebrow in fond amusement when I point out a chaffinch making its way from branch to branch, but I think she’s beginning to understand my enthusiasm.’

Sounds familiar. Same here. My wife is not really into bird watching herself, but she doesn’t seem to mind walking beside me on some forgotten spot north, way off-road and away from urban areas.
Not since our encounter with the ornithologist have we travelled so far away, although we’ve travelled to some remote spots since. Not many people that I speak to lately have ever heard of the ‘Storm Petrel’ colonies on Mousa Island, nor have they heard of RSPB’s reserve ‘Maverick Head’ on Orkney, or the peatland near ‘The Old Man of Hoy’ where Mister Bonxie claims his home (Great Skua)…

(Fair Isle holds some 3 percent of the world’s population of Great Skua’s, or Bonxies as they call them in Shetland.)
Or the ‘Island of Noss’, with its famous cliffs called ‘Birdcity’, where 12’000 pairs of Gannets are breeding each summer. Visiting Noss, or sailing around the Island with a purpose-built boat (Dunter III), was one of these timeless moments we had a few years ago, with regard to bird watching. Trust me, it is an unbelievable experience when literally thousands of birds are ‘wheeling’ on top of your head, and pooping all the time whilst doing so. Truly an amazing experience!

Or that day when I was filming an otter feeding on the shoreline of Yell, whilst a flock of Arctic Terns made it very clear they were not happy with my presence there. Heaps of them continuously attacked me, like ‘dive bombers’ and tried to peck my head, each having their turn, and even worse, pooping at the same time. Several birds attacked and were so fierce that afterwards my wife had to disinfect my head because I was bleeding (with bird poo in the open wound). But even so it was an awesome experience and these events will stay with me for the rest of my life.

Puffin bringing in nesting material at South Gavel, Buness Fair Isle.  

Photo: Jan Jacops
Bird watching became an important part of losing myself in a different World, one without the stresses and strains of my working life. My reborn love of birds is something I carry around all day. I’m always looking for them, whenever and wherever I am.

So Matthew continues: ‘But there is another, deeper need, that watching birds has fulfilled in me. Meditation. I’ve never found sitting still and urging my mind towards emptiness to be an easy experience. But sometimes, when I’m bird watching, I lose myself as profoundly as more conventional meditators might lose themselves.’

I think I know now what he means. In the past I didn’t take enough ‘me’ time. Keeping my head ‘clean’ is of as much importance as trying to keep the body in decent shape. If not even more important.

‘There are those, of course, who take bird watching several steps further. Twitchers are people who, on learning that a rare species has arrived, briefly, in another area, travel sometimes huge distances to see it for themselves.’

On Fair Isle they now the meaning of the word ‘Twitcher’… The spring and autumn migrating season attracts many of them, looking for that one breed missing on their list.

Just as fooling around with model airplanes or building and contesting with amateur radio adds to my life, so does bird watching. The professor certainly lit the spark, but the dry wood was lying there since childhood, planted by my grandfather, I know that now…

Northern Wheatear (male) at Pund, Fair Isle. Photo: Jan Jacops
Some years ago, whilst on the ferry between Lerwick and Aberdeen I was on the aft deck enjoying the Atlantic sunset when we passed by a tiny Island. Totally by coincidence, a fellow traveler who also turned out to be a Belgian citizen, pointed out this place was called Fair Isle, and it was renowned for its many bird species. “Some 385 different species of birds are spotted here over the years.” Truly a birders heaven … “There are even endemic species, like the Fair Isle Wren with its distinct song.” Now he got my attention! Upon coming home I immediately started googeling, and within a day or so the decision was made to go there the next summer.

Getting there is part of the overall experience they say. True! One more: ”If you need to be back on time, then don’t come.” I’ve learned that the hard way…

Nevertheless, it wouldn’t be my last visit … meanwhile I’ve visited the island for three successive years and still feel I am not finished with it.

My visit’s are not limited to bird watching though. I try to get to know the locals, and take part in their local activities whenever the opportunity arrives. Like last year’s ‘dance night’ in their community hall. I’ve learned that many of the residents have musical talent!

Seems to me that the people who are living on this island are very lucky to spend their lives on a remarkably peaceful island, where family values and especially tranquility is preserved over time. Time doesn’t seem to have much effect on them either.

Many envy them. At least I do.

Just as the migrating birds learned where to refuel, I found out as well.

REFERENCE

Telegraph.co.uk 11 Apr 2015 I’m a birdwatcher and I’m not afraid to admit it by Matthew Staden